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FM AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4169
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 000317

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA. NSC FOR SHAPIRO/PASCUAL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/24/2024

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SUBJECT: IMPRESSIONS FROM GAZA-BASED LES

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary. ConGen RSO LES who lives and works in Gaza City, said that Hamas remains in firm control of Gaza. He notes that local support for Hamas has decreased since the December 2008 - January 2009 conflict, but decreased support for Hamas does not mean increased support for the current PA leadership. Gazans feel that the PA failed them during hostilities, and PA efforts to distribute aid are not visible enough to counter this impression. He said reconstruction has not begun in Gaza because materials are not available, and the tunnels, which resumed operating shortly after the temporary cease-fire, appear to have been shut from the Egyptian side, raising the price of goods. End Summary.

HAMAS IN CONTROL OF GAZA,
BUT POPULARITY DECREASING

¶2. (S) ConGen RSO LES Saji al-Mughani, who lives and works in Gaza, told ConGenOffs during a February 18 visit to Jerusalem that Hamas remains firmly in control of the Gaza Strip. He told ConGen offs that the Hamas leadership remains intact, and that it uses media outlets (TV, radio, and newspapers) to project an image of strength. He said Hamas recruits fighters, even among non-religious Gazans, by offering work, money, weapons, and prestige.

¶3. (S) Al-Mughani described Hamas as working hard to appear professional and provide security, adding that there are more foreigners affiliated with relief agencies and international organizations in Gaza now than before. He has not seen any evidence of Iranians in Gaza. Gaza's clans are "finished," al-Mughani said, explaining that Hamas confiscation of weapons left the clans unable to challenge its hold on power. While various armed groups continued to launch occasional rocket and mortar attacks on Israel, al-Mughani asserted that Hamas could halt such attacks if it wants to.

¶4. (S) Al-Mughani said Hamas's popularity has decreased since the end of hostilities, largely because Gazans blame Hamas for the conflict with Israel. He said Gazans believe Hamas's "Muslim Brotherhood agenda" has trumped the Palestinian cause, and they resent the way Hamas leaders abroad have promoted "resistance" from a comfortable distance. He believes many Gazans who voted for Hamas in 2006 now regret it, even though they refrain from publicly criticizing Hamas out of fear of retribution. Al-Mughani explained that, during the December 2008 - January 2009 fighting, Hamas "kept people scared" by issuing house arrest orders to those deemed a threat. Plain-clothes Hamas security personnel "made examples" of those who failed to comply. Hamas security personnel rounded up and roughed up "hundreds" of Gazans for making critical or irreverent remarks, he said.

¶5. (S) Hamas operates interrogation rooms in hospitals, clinics, former NGOs, and residences, al-Mughani said. He

described Gaza City's Shifa Hospital as "an operations center for Hamas" and said it was a virtual "closed military zone" during the December 2008 - January 2009 fighting. Anyone attempting to visit patients during the conflict was subject to scrutiny from Hamas security personnel.

SUPPORT FOR THE PA STAGNANT

¶6. (S) Most Gazans would like to see the PA return to Gaza, according to al-Mughani, but Hamas's unpopularity does not translate into support for the current PA leadership. He said Gazans believe President Abbas (Abu Mazen) and other PA officials failed to support them during the conflict. He said the PA has not capitalized politically on its compensation program for Gazans who lost their homes. UNDP has undertaken damage assessments and is handing out cash, he said, but Gazans credit the UN, not the PA, for this support. Al-Mughani said that Hamas, in contrast, distributes assistance through very visible ceremonies: flags, flowers, candy for children, and the Hamas "Minister of Economy" handing cash directly to home owners.

RECONSTRUCTION YET TO COMMENCE, AID DISTRIBUTION ALONG POLITICAL LINES

¶7. (S) Al-Mughani said that there is no visible reconstruction in Gaza because no reconstruction materials are available. He said the IDF leveled Gaza's cement factories -- along with its entire industrial zone in the north -- as it withdrew. Al-Mughani said NGOs in Gaza are

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affiliated with one faction or another whether overtly or discreetly, and tend to deliver assistance to that faction's constituency. Thus, he said, Hamas believes that international aid is going through PA-affiliated NGOs and that Hamas supporters will not benefit.

TUNNEL OPERATIONS IN RAFAH

¶8. (S) Al-Mughani said much of Gaza's cement was used to construct tunnels. He said entrepreneurs could make an NIS 20,000 (roughly USD 5,000) "contribution" to the Rafah Municipality in return for Hamas's approval and cooperation on tunnel construction. Tunnel operators record the goods they smuggle into Gaza and pay taxes on those goods. Certain goods, such as pharmaceuticals, are not taxed because they contribute to "the greater good." He said the tunnels are lit and well-ventilated. Most are more than 30 feet underground, on the Gaza side, largely insulated from the effects of Israeli bombardment. Many tunnels have ceilings high enough to allow a grown man to stand, he said.

¶9. (S) Al-Mughani said that some tunnels continued to operate during the Israeli airstrikes, and that many others began operating again within days after the temporary cease-fire. He said it is clear to Gazans when the tunnels are operating because of changes in the cost of fuel and other goods. Within ten days of the temporary cease-fire, the price of fuel was NIS 2 per liter. However, starting around February 12, the cost rose to NIS 5 per liter, and then fuel disappeared almost entirely from the markets. Al-Mughani said this indicated that Egypt is cracking down on smuggling. He said, however, that tunnels with entrances hidden inside private homes are harder to close.

WALLES